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AUTHOR Gecas, Viktor; Nye, F. Ivan
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines sex and class differences in the style and circumstances of parental discipline of the child. Specifically, we have focused on Melvin Kohn's suggestive hypothesis that white collar parents stress the development of internal standards of conduct in their children and thus are more likely to discipline the child on the basis of their interpretation of the child's motives for a particular act, while blue collar parents are more likely to react on the basis of the consequences of the child's behavior. Our findings, based on a sample of 210 Washington State couples, support this hypothesis. We found a greater difference in the responses of white collar parents toward their child when he "accidentally breaks something" versus when he "intentionally disobeys" than there was for blue collar parents. Other class and sex differences in parental response to the child were also explored. (Author)

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SEX AND CLASS DIFFERENCES IN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION: A TEST OF KOHN'S HYPOTHESIS*

Viktor Gecas
Washington State University

F. Ivan Nye
Washington State University

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SEX AND CLASS DIFFERENCES IN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION: A TEST OF KOHN'S HYPOTHESIS

This paper focuses on styles of behavior utilized by parents to discipline their children or to elicit their compliance. Style, perhaps even more than content, is an important aspect of the quality of an interpersonal relationship, and in the rather vast literature on child socialization it has received considerable emphasis. For example, the degree to which parents are supportive, controlling, hostile, democratic, use reason or punishment in dealing with the child have been found to be consequential to the way in which the child develops (cf. Baumrind, 1971; Becker, 1964; Gecas, 1971; and Hess, 1970). Two of the most frequently used analytical variables in these examinations of parent-child interaction are sex of parent and social class. The first is a major axis of structural differentiation within the family; the second is a major axis of social differentiation.

We approach parental disciplinary techniques with two objectives: (1) to describe and compare the reported behaviors of mothers and fathers in different social classes; and (2) to test Kohn's (1969) hypothesis of social class differences in parental response to the circumstances of the child's behavior.

Research dealing with social class variations in the style of socialization (child rearing) has consistently shown that since World War II, middle class parents have become increasingly more permissive in child rearing than have lower class parents. Bronfenbrenner (1958) attributed this trend to the influence of professional advice through mass communication, such as Dr. Spock's book on child care, and the differential exposure of mothers in dif-

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ferent social classes to this source of information. Middle class mothers would be more likely to seek out and be influenced by professional advice on child rearing than would lower class mothers. This professional advice, Bronfenbrenner argued, reflecting strongly the neo-Freudian influence, stressed permissiveness coupled with love in child rearing, as opposed to the preceding philosophy emphasizing constraint, discipline, and the dangers of "sparing the rod and spoiling the child." Wolfenstein (1963) documented this shift in values from a "duty oriented" to a "fun oriented" socialization in her content analysis of advice to mothers given (from 1914-1951) in the Infant Care Bulletin of the Children's Bureau. And it is middle class parents, better educated and typically more isolated from interaction with extended kin because of greater mobility, who were more likely to take this advice to heart. In terms of disciplinary styles this means that middle class parents would be more likely to use reason with the child, verbal threats, or withdrawal of rewards to punish or solicit the child's compliance, while lower class parents would be expected to rely more heavily on physical punishment of the child (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1958).

But is there anything about social class per se which might affect the content and style of the socialization role? Kohn (1963; 1969) provides the most elaborate and theoretically convincing discussion of the link between the occupational structure (the most commonly used indicator of social class) and the socialization role of the parent. He states that members of different social classes, by virtue of experiencing different conditions of life, come to see the world differently, develop different conceptions of social reality, different aspirations, and different conceptions of desirable personality characteristics (1963, p. 472).

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In discussing the conditions of life distinctive of these classes, Kohn (1969) identifies three ways in which middle class occupations (white collar) differ from lower class occupations (blue collar). First, white collar occupations typically require the individual to deal more with the manipulation of ideas, symbols and interpersonal relations, whereas blue collar occupations deal more with the manipulation of physical objects and require less interpersonal skill. Second, white collar occupations involve work that is more complex, requires greater flexibility, thought, and judgment, while in blue collar occupations the individual is more subject to the standardization of work. Third, the degree and closeness of supervision is less in white collar than in blue collar occupations. As a result of these differences between the conditions of white collar (WC) and blue collar (BC) occupational structures, two basic value orientations emerge. White collar workers are more likely to enunciate values dealing with self-direction, such as freedom, individualism, initiative, creativity, and self-actualization, while blue collar parents are more likely to stress values of conformity to external standards such as orderliness, neatness, and obedience. Kohn, in fact, did find that the white collar and blue collar parents he studied did differ in this expected direction: WC parents were more likely to value in their children internal standards for governing one's relations with other people and with one's self, such as consideration, curiosity, and self-control; BC parents, on the other hand, were more likely to emphasize characteristics reflecting conformity to external constraints in their children. Parental values, then, tend to be extensions of the modes of behavior that are functional for parents in their occupational structures, and they become apparent in the context of socialization.[1]

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Kohn also maintained that these value orientations are reflected in the style or circumstance of parental discipline. Because of the greater emphasis white collar parents place on self direction and internal standards of conduct, they are more likely to discipline the child on the basis of their interpretation of the child's intent or motive for acting as he does. Blue collar parents, on the other hand, placing greater stress on conformity, are more likely to react on the basis of the consequences of the child's behavior. They are apt to punish the child when his behavior is annoying, destructive, or disobedient (Kohn, 1969, p. 104).

Evidence for this hypothesis comes primarily from Kohn's Washington D.C. study (cf. Kohn, 1969, Chapter 6), which was based on a sample of 339 mothers and a subsample of 82 fathers and children. Kohn specified a number of conditions or situations under which mothers and fathers punish children.[2] Parental responses to the child's behavior for each situation were then coded into five categories: (1) ignore behavior, (2) scold and admonish child to be good, (3) separate child from others or divert attention, (4) isolate child or restrict activities, and (5) punish physically.

Kohn found that middle-class parents (especially mothers) were quite descriminate in the use of physical punishment depending on whether the child's behavior was defined as "wild play" or "loss of temper." They were much more likely to use physical punishment in the latter situation because, Kohn argues, this represents to the parent the child's loss of self control, a valued characteristic. Lower class mothers, on the other hand, reported the use of physical punishment with equal frequency in both situations--it is the consequences of the child's behavior, i.e., disruptive behavior in this case, which are most likely to elicit the parent's response.

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We are able to address this theoretical issue by comparing parental responses to the child's misbehavior in situations pointedly differing in one respect, the child's intent. Parents were asked what they would do under two sets of circumstances: (1) when the child accidently breaks something that the parent values, and (2) when the child intentionally disobeys the parent. These behavioral circumstances are not identical to those posed by Kohn, but they are comparable to the two situations that he isolated for special attention (in the sense that they reflect different motives): (1) "When the child plays wildly," and (2) "When he loses his temper." And, if Kohn's reasoning is correct, these two situations should differentiate similarly between the responses of middle class and lower class parents. According to Kohn's hypothesis, middle class parents should be more discriminating in their responses to the child between situations one and two, while lower class parents should be more uniform in their responses across the two situations.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

A 20 percent random sample was drawn from all parents of children in the third grade of the public and parochial schools in a medium-sized county (Yakima) of the State of Washington. A separate questionnaire was developed for each spouse. Both were mailed jointly to husband and wife with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and soliciting their help. Separate return envelopes were enclosed so that neither spouse would have to handle the form completed by the other. Spouses were asked not to discuss the questions or their answers with each other, but there was no way to enforce that request. Usable returns completed by both husband and wife were obtained from about 46

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percent of those sampled (after eliminating those who had moved leaving no address, those with no spouse in residence, and those who could not read English). Some returns were received (48 from wives, 11 from husbands) in which the spouse did not return a questionnaire. Two-hundred ten couples returned usable forms and analyses are based on these respondents.

Since data were gathered during 1970, sample characteristics can be compared appropriately with the 1970 Census for the State of Washington and for the United States as a whole. Since the males in this study were in the 30-50 age range, the Census category 35-45 years of age is used for comparison purposes. Income data are for married men, spouse present; education and occupation data are for all men aged 35-45. Limited Census data are for all men aged 35-45. Limited Census data are available from Yakima county, but not separately for the age group under consideration (Bureau of the Census, 1972).

Table 1 about here

Our sample more closely approximates the State of Washington census than the United States (Table 1). For education completed, the sample corresponds very closely to the State. The sample includes a substantially larger proportion of couples with incomes under $10,000.00 (42% compared to 29% for Washington and 35% for the United States). This difference reflects the substantially lower income in the County compared to the rest of the states and to the United States as a whole.

Occupationally, the sample includes more proprietors and managers and more farm owners and workers than State or U.S. and fewer craftsmen. The greater proportion of farm and lesser proportion of craftsmen largely reflect

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differences between the County and the State. Eleven percent of the employed males in Yakima County work in agriculture--the same proportion as in the sample. The County has fewer craftsmen but a precise figure is not available because the City and County Data Book (1972) combines craftsmen with operatives. Insufficient data are available as to whether there are more businesses per thousand population in Yakima County than in the State as a whole, so we cannot determine whether the higher proportion in that category reflects a population difference or a higher than average return from that occupational category.

In general, then, the sample represents the State quite well except at points where the County is known to differ. Both the sample and the State differ at points from the United States. Therefore, appropriate caution in generalizing from the results is called for.

Measures of Parental Behavior

To get at the issue of style of parent-child interaction, we asked parents how they would respond to the child under three sets of circumstances stated as follows: (1) "What kinds of things do you do to get your child (age 8-10) to do something you want him to do?" (2) "If your child is playing and accidentally breaks something that you value, what would you do?" and (3) "If your child intentionally disobeys after you have told him to do something, what would you do?" The first question was designed to determine the positive strategies parents use to obtain the child's compliance. Questions two and three were aimed at eliciting the kinds of behaviors parents employ in dealing with the child's disruptive behavior or his disobedience.

The first situation was stated as an open-end question allowing the respondent to write in an asnwer. These answers were subsequently coded into

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the most frequently appearing categories (constructed on the basis of an initial content analysis of the responses). The final set of response categories for situation one was as follows: (1) Ask or request, (2) Tell child to do it, (3) Explain or reason with child, (4) Reward or bribe, (5) Threaten or scold, (6) Spank, (7) Restrict privileges, (8) Assign, write down, set time, and (9) Other methods.

Situations two and three (accidental and deliberate disobedience) were precoded and the respondent was asked to check as many categories as applied from the following list: (1) Scold and/or yell, (2) Reduce allowance or fine child, (3) Ignore behavior, (4) Don't punish but discuss problem, (5) Make child feel guilty, (6) Keep reminding him not to do it, (7) Restrict privileges, (8) Spank, (9) Slap, (10) Withdraw affection, (11) Isolate the child and (12) Other. In the data analysis, some of these response categories, which received very low frequencies, were either combined or placed in the "Other" category.

Measure of Social Class

Our principal indicator of social class was husband's occupation. We coded this variable in two ways: (1) Using the census occupation categories, and (2) Using Duncan's social prestige scale (cf. A.J. Reiss, 1961). Since the results were very similar for the two occupation scales, we have presented our analyses only for the census categories. Also, since we were only interested in a two-category occupation measure to correspond with the concepts "lower class" and "middle class" we collapsed the census occupation categories into "blue collar" and "white collar" occupations. The "blue collar" category ranges from unskilled workers and farmers to technicians and craftsmen, while the "white collar" category ranges from clerks and salesmen to doctors and business executives (similar to Kohn's social class dichotomy).

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FINDINGS

The strategies parents use to get their children to do something are presented in Table 2. The four most frequent response categories for fathers and mothers are to "ask or request the child," to "tell him," to "reason with him and explain why he should do it," and to "bribe by giving a reward or promising one" (these categories are not mutually exclusive). An interesting difference between the responses of fathers and mothers is that the most frequent strategy for mothers is to ask their children to do something (51%), while fathers are most likely to tell them to do something (37%). Mothers are also more likely to reason with the child than are fathers. For that matter, mothers use more strategies in getting the child's compliance than do fathers. For all but two of the response categories they showed higher frequencies, while fathers were more limited in their responses and also appeared somewhat more authoritarian.

Table 2 about here

Comparing white collar and blue collar parents in the strategies they use to elicit the child's compliance, we find white collar parents more frequently indicating that they "ask or request" the child as well as explain the reasons for the request when they want him to do something. But blue collar mothers are not too different from the white collar respondents in their pattern of responses--they also rely heavily on request and reason with their child. Blue collar fathers, on the other hand, seem the most limited in the range of their responses to the child and the most authoritarian. "Telling the child" to do something was their most frequent response category (36%) compared to "asking the child" (23%) and "explaining the

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reasons for the request" (8%).

The style and to some extent the circumstance of parental discipline are reflected in Table 3. On the question of what would the parent do if "your child is playing and accidentally breaks something that you value?" over 50% of mothers and fathers indicated that they would not punish the child, but would discuss the problem with him. Slightly more fathers (26%) than mothers (19%) said they would use physical punishment, e.g., spank or slap the child. But the most frequent response of the mothers under this circumstance is to scold or yell at the child (61%), which was a comparatively frequent category for the father as well (45%). Scolding and yelling as well as discussing the situation with the child may be viewed as reprimanding the child for an act that may not be his fault. They represent relatively lenient reactions.

Table 3 about here

The second circumstance, however, is viewed by parents as a more serious transgression. The question as posed asked: "If your child intentionally disobeys after you have told him to do something, what would you do?" Sixty-eight percent of the fathers and 61% of the mothers said that they would physically punish the child. Another 50% of the parents would punish by restricting the child's privileges (51% of fathers and 59% of mothers). A surprisingly low proportion of parents (2% of fathers and 0% of mothers) said that they would use withdrawal of affection as a means of punishing the child. This is surprising considering the amount of attention this technique has received by scholars in this area, and the extent to which it has been

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used to describe child discipline practices of American families (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner, 1970; and Green, 1960).

In Table 4 we find further support for the claim that middle class parents are more verbal in disciplining their children and are more likely to use reason with the child than are lower class parents. This is especially true of white collar mothers. For both disciplinary situations they were the most likely of the four groups of respondents to scold and yell at the child (75% and 20% across the two situations). Blue collar parents were somewhat more likely to use physical punishment in disciplining the child. This difference was more pronounced for situation one in which the offense was unintentional.

But now we might ask, How different are parental responses to the child depending on the circumstances of the child's behavior? Following Kohn's argument we hypothesized that there would be a greater difference in the responses of middle class parents between situations one and two, which differ in terms of motive for the child's behavior, than there would be for lower class parents. Our findings, presented in Table 4, give modest support to this hypothesis. Combining the percentage differences between circumstances one and two for the five most common response categories, we find that the differences are greater for white collar parents than for blue collar parents. In other words, the responses of white collar parents are slightly more discriminating with regard to the circumstances of the child's behavior than are those of blue collar parents. The largest difference score was found in the responses of middle class mothers (176 percentage points). In general, wives were more discriminating than husbands (which Kohn also found).

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Looking at the specific response categories, we find that the largest percentage differences for both classes and sexes of parents occurred in the "punish physically," the "discuss problem," and to a lesser extent the "restrict privileges" categories. In the situation where the child accidentally breaks something, parents are much more likely to discuss the event without punishing the child--this is especially true of middle class mothers. But when the child intentionally disobeys a parent, he is more likely to receive physical punishment or restriction of privileges. Again, these differences are greater for middle class parents than for lower class parents.

Table 4 about here

The differences found between blue collar and white collar parents in response to the child's behavior are paralleled by differences between parents of different educational levels. There is a tendency for college educated wives and their spouses to discuss the problem with the child when his behavior is accidentally disruptive and, in general, to more frequently reason with the child as a strategy of behavior control. Wives with high school education or less, and their spouses, were more likely to resort to physical punishment and scolding the child under these circumstances.

Table 5 about here

Comparison of education levels gives even stronger support to Kohn's hypothesis than was the case for occupation, e.g., there is a greater dif-

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ference between parental responses to the child in situations one and two for college educated parents than for those of high school education. The highest difference score, for five of the most frequent response categories, is found for college women (summary difference = 197); the lowest is found for husbands of high school wives (D = 126). The difference is larger for women than men, a difference of 65 points between the summary scores of wives in these two education categories versus a difference of 34 points for husbands.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Kohn (1969) has proposed that parents in different social classes, by virtue of experiencing different occupational requirements and realities, emphasize different values in the socialization of their children. White collar parents, he argued, stress the development of internal standards of conduct in their children and thus are more likely to discipline the child on the basis of their interpretation of the child's motives for a particular act, while blue collar parents are more likely to emphasize values of conformity to external standards and therefore are more likely to react on the basis of the consequences of the child's behavior.

Our findings give modest support to Kohn's. We predicted and found greater differentiation in the responses of white collar parents than in those of blue collar parents between two contexts of the child's behavior differing in one essential respect--the child's intentions or motives. There was a greater difference in the way white collar parents acted toward the child when he "accidentally breaks something" versus when he "intentionally disobeys" than there was for blue collar parents. Differences in parents' educational level produced the same results: College educated parents were

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more discriminating in their responses depending on the behavioral situation than were parents with high school educations or less.

The differences, however, like Kohn's, were not very great, and we certainly would not conclude from these findings that lower class parents are insensitive to the circumstances of the child's misbehavior or to his intentions in disciplining him. We do conclude, however, that middle class parents are more finely attuned to these considerations and probably for the reasons discussed by Kohn.[3]

Our examination of sex and class differences in styles of parental discipline has also shown that mothers more frequently use reason and request in order to get the child to do something, while fathers more often tell the child to do it. In circumstances where the child engages in disruptive behavior or intentionally disobeys the parent, mothers are more likely to be verbal in their response (scolding and yelling at the child) while fathers rely more on physical punishment. Mothers also appear to express a wider range of responses to the child in these situations than do fathers. This was also the pattern of differences between middle and lower class parents. Middle class parents were more prone to verbal reprimands of the child, while lower class parents were more limited in range of responses and more physical, giving support to previous descriptions of social class differences in parent-child interaction.

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FOOTNOTES

1. When Kohn further analyzed the occupation categories in terms of the three conditions considered conducive to (or restrictive of) the exercise of self-direction in work (i.e., closeness of supervision; dealing with people, data, or things; and complexity of work), he found these characteristics each highly related to differences in value orientations.

2. Eight situations were specified by Kohn: (1) When the child plays wildly, (2) Fights with brothers or sisters, (3) Fights with other children, (4) Loses his temper, (5) Refuses to do what you tell him, (6) Steals something, (7) Smokes cigarettes, (8) Uses language you disapprove of.

3. It should also be mentioned that Kohn found this relationship between social class and values reflected in child socialization to be extremely stable and relatively invariant--it was only slightly affected by such major structural variables as race, nationality, religion, size of community of residence, family size, age and sex of child, and it held cross-culturally (U.S. and Turin, Italy). Therefore, it should not be taken lightly or dismissed as insignificant.

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TABLE 1

COMPARISONS OF OUR SAMPLE WITH CENSUS INFORMATION ON SELECT CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT MALES (AGE 35-44) FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON AND THE TOTAL UNITED STATES* (In Percent)

	Our Sample	Sample Comparisons State of Washington	United States
Education			
7 years or less	5	5	11
8 years	6	7	9
9 - 11 years	13	17	20
12 years	39	35	32
13 - 15 years	15	15	11
16 or more	22	21	17
	100	100	100
Total Family Income			
Under $3,000	4	2	3
$3,000 to $5,999	5	5	7
$6,000 to $9,999	34	22	25
$10,000 to $14,999	34	39	36
$15,000 to $24,999	18	26	23
$25,000 or more	5	6	6
	100	100	100
Occupation			
Professional, et al.	20	21	17
Managers (except farm)	22	14	14
Clerical	5	6	7
Salesman	6	7	7
Craftsman	16	23	23
Operatives	13	15	19
Service Workers	5	5	5
Farmers and Laborers	11	4	4
Laborers (nonfarm)	2	5	6
	100	100	100

*Data are from the Bureau of the Census, Detailed Characteristics, 1970, Tables 148, 174, and 198 (Washington); Tables 199, 226, and 250 (United States).

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TABLE 2. WHAT PARENTS DO TO GET CHILD TO DO SOMETHING BY FATHER'S OCCUPATION AND SEX OF PARENT (IN PERCENT)

	White Collar		Blue Collar		Total	
	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers
Ask or request	39	55	23	48	31	51
Explain, Reason With	18	28	8	16	13	22
Reward, Bribe	28	24	16	28	22	26
Tell Them	37	35	36	33	37	34
Threaten or Scold	8	10	2	13	5	12
Restrict Privileges	8	16	7	16	8	16
Spank	6	7	5	14	6	11
Discipline Other	9	7	7	4	8	6
N =	107	107	93	93	200	200

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TABLE 3. PARENTAL RESPONSE TO CHILD IF CHILD:

(IN PERCENT)

	Accidently Breaks Something		Intentionally Disobeys	
	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers
Ignore Behavior	1%	2%	0%	0%
Discuss Problem	61	56	17	18
Scold and/or Yell	45	61	31	40
Make Child Feel Guilty	8	6	7	4
Withdraw Affection	1	0	2	0
Restrict Privileges	23	16	51	59
Isolate Child	1	1	6	9
Punish Physically	26	19	68	61
Other	12	7	12	11

TABLE 4. PARENTAL RESPONSE TO CHILD ACCORDING TO CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CHILD'S BEHAVIOR BY FATHER'S OCCUPATION (IN PERCENT)

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	Situation 1: Child Accidentally Breaks Something				Situation 2: Child Intentionally Disobeys				Differences between 1 and 2			
	White Collar		Blue Collar		White Collar		Blue Collar		White Collar		Blue Collar	
	F*	M*	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Ignore Behavior	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	0				
Discuss Problem	62	70	56	51	17	20	15	16	46	49	41	35
Scold and/or Yell	47	75	37	56	30	49	32	32	17	26	5	24
Make Child Guilty	6	6	10	5	6	6	10	2				
Withdraw Affection	3	1	0	0	5	0	0	0				
Restrict Privileges	20	17	21	16	56	57	45	59	36	40	24	43
Isolate Child	2	3	0	0	6	14	5	3	4	11	5	3
Punish Physically	19	18	28	21	65	67	70	55	45	50	42	34
Other	9	4	4	3	6	9	3	2				
N =	107	107	93	93	107	107	93	93				
Sum of Differences =									148	176	117	139

*F = Fathers; M = Mothers

TABLE 5. PERCENTAGE POINT DIFFERENCES IN PARENTAL RESPONSES BETWEEN SITUATIONS ONE AND TWO BY MOTHER'S EDUCATION

	High School or Less		College	
	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers
Discuss Problem	40	30	61	42
Scold and/or Yell	13	21	15	25
Restrict Privileges	27	41	27	54
Isolate Child	4	3	2	18
Punish Physically	42	37	55	58
Sum =	126	132	160	197